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Third World is trampled as giants fight for more

By Hilary Ng'weno

NAIROBI — The two superpowers do not challenge each other in Europe where the armies of the Warsaw Pact and the NATO alliance stare down the barrels of each other's guns. No, the challenge — and the bloodshed — takes place in the bushes of Africa, the deserts of the Middle East, the jungles of Southeast Asia and the mountains of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. To quote an old African adage: When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.

Still, the Russians are perplexed by the Third World's reaction to their intervention in Afghanistan. After all, only a few months earlier, the Third World leaders praised the Soviet Union as their natural ally. Why, then, when the issue of Soviet troops in Afghanistan came up in the U.N. General Assembly did over two-thirds of the Third World nations vote with the imperialist West for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops?

The Kremlin's confusion about Third World responses is mirrored in the United States. American policy-makers cannot understand why the Arabs are not running into their arms for protection against the atheist Russians. Why aren't the non-aligned countries unanimously opposed to Russia's naked aggression against an independent Third World nation?

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In the accompanying two articles, American and Soviet spokesmen debate who's to blame for the upheaval in Afghanistan. Marshall Shulman, an adviser on Soviet affairs to the U.S. secretary of state, is on leave as head of Columbia University's Russian Institute. Vladimir Ostrovsky is a political commentator for the Soviet press agency Novosti. Both articles

The Soviets and the Americans are both puzzled by the Third World's evaluation of events in Iran and Afghanistan because each sees the rest of the world only in terms of its own national interest. They have divided the world not as it is, but as they wish it to be, and in the process they have misjudged the magnitude of the Third World's mistrust of them both.

That mistrust comes from three decades of bitter experience. In the years since World War II, the only wars that have been fought between the Americans and the Russians have used Third World surrogates in Third World regions like Korea, the Middle East, Indochina, Angola, the Horn of Africa. These wars — financed, engineered and fueled by the superpowers — have taken the lives of millions and have caused immense suffering.

In Vietnam the United States perfected some of the most lethal instruments of destruction the world has ever known. The Soviet's ability to move men and materiel quickly in combat was tested in the Ethiopia-Somalia war of 1978 and later put to use in the December 1979 Soviet move in Afghanistan. The Soviets also successfully tested their ability to coordinate global operations when they ferried thousands of troops from Cuba to Angola.

The sense of mistrust is not helped by the blatant propaganda the superpowers pour out to justify their rape of the Third World. When Russian troops overthrew the Afghan government of Hafizullah Amin and installed their hand-picked man, Babrak Karmal, their line was that they had been invited by the Afghans in accordance with a mutual defense pact. The propaganda machinery forgot to explain why Amin and his family were summarily executed by the soldiers they had invited into their country. (The Chinese were more honest when they invaded Tibet. They told the world that Tibet had always been part of China. Although the world may have been shocked by China's aggression, there was at least an element of honesty in its stated intentions. Nothing remotely similar can be said of the activities of the superpowers in the Third World.)

Oil vs. Freedom

The current problems in western Asia stem from American duplicity in Iran. It was in the name of freedom that Washington encouraged or condoned the shah in his tyrannical ways. What did it matter that his dreaded SAVAK detained, jailed and tortured thousands of Iranians so long as the oil flowed freely and the Russians were kept at bay? While it may be true that the Iranians have always had an interest in checking Russia's southward expansion, what motivated the Americans to give military and economic assistance to the shah's regime had to do with American national interests, not Iranian interests. However great the cost to the people of Iran in freedom and political stability, Iran was to be the local guarantor of American access to cheap oil from the Middle East and Gulf countries. It is little wonder that, even with the Russians breathing down their necks, the Iranians still hold the United States to be the No. 1 Villain. And they do not need a cantankerous old imam to egg them on.

Then there is the economic plight of the Third World. Year after year Third World people see the economic gap widening between themselves and the superpowers. It makes no difference whether the relations are between the Soviet Union and her socialist Third World client states or between the United States and her capitalist Third World client states. Nearly two decades of trade between Cuba and the Soviet Union have led to the same kind of dependency for Cuba as that between, say, the United States and Somoza's Nicaragua.

While the Russians shout against imperialism, they do next to nothing to help its victims get out of the mess in which colonialism left them. Countries that opt for a Marxist-Leninist way of life do get some assistance. But as Angola, Mozambique, Somalia and Ethiopia in Africa, Cuba in America, Syria and Iraq in the Middle East and Cambodia in Southeast Asia have found out, Soviet assistance is more likely to be in tanks and armaments than in productive or useful commodities.

America may give more economic aid to its Third World partners, but the volume of the aid is strictly determined by its own strategic interests, as it has demonstrated in

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